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# The History and Current Challenges of Libraries in Japan

By Francis A. Alix, San Jose State University

With a population of approximately 127 million people, Japanese libraries must serve a large user-base heavily immersed in the information age. The country has several library sectors, including academic, community, national, public, school, and special libraries. Modern Western-style public libraries emerged after World War II when the United States exerted pressure on Japan during its occupation to reform their libraries to meet the American standard (Harris & Thaler, 2020) and overcome the moral suasion campaign during the Fifteen-Year War (1931-1945) when libraries stocked materials that supported the campaign of censorship and thought-control (Domier, 2007). Since then, the country has developed libraries to meet the interests and needs of its users according to Western standards.

Japan's libraries have many positive attributes and continue to evolve. However, many library sectors struggle with serving users because of staff outsourcing, library leadership, and a focus on circulation statistics that prevent them from developing into 21st-century information and community centers. This paper reviews the history and current status of each library sector, including their services and staffing. It then examines their current challenges and how professionalism, librarian education, and community engagement are the main challenges to their success and suggests recommendations to elevate them to compete in the global arena.

## Literature Review

Libraries in Japan evolved over the centuries, with the first repositories established in the sixth and seventh by Buddhist monks and feudal private libraries in the twelfth to sixteenth centuries (Harris & Thaler, 2020). Libraries continued to evolve until the first government library in 1872 in Tokyo (Sellers & Wakashige, 2012). Libraries in the following years did not emerge as institutions for the general public, with few libraries built in the first half of the 20th century as Japan developed its military before and during World War II. The library landscape changed in the postwar period with the enactment of the School

Education Law for school libraries in 1947, the National Diet Library Law for the national library in 1948, the Library Law of 1950 for public libraries, and the University Establishment Standards for university libraries in 1956 (Takayama et al. 2017). The government body that helps national and public libraries is the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) with the National Institute for Informatics (NII) focusing on the needs of academic libraries, although libraries do not report to them (Hosono, 2006).

Japan has a total of 42,884 libraries in the country with 1,519 academic, 36 national, 3,360 public, and 37,979 school libraries with over three million academic library users and over 33 million public library users (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions [IFLA], n.d.). Community libraries for children are estimated between 3,000 and 4,000 (Hashimoto, 2012), and special libraries at 1,761 (Japan Library Association, 2014a). Seventy-nine thousand staff keep all types of libraries running, with public libraries having two times more volunteers than full-time staff.

The services of Japanese libraries are somewhat parallel to other industrialized countries with uneven success across most library sectors. Cheunwattana (2008) found that "public library service for children was not available or inadequate" (p. 19) when interviewing owners of community libraries. Sellers and Wakashige (2012) shared other challenges such as technology integration, training opportunities for library staff, serving underserved persons, advancing digital services, and copyright issues. The following sections examine the history and major challenges, if any, of each library sector.

## *Academic Libraries*

### *Overview*

The first university, the University of Tokyo, was founded in 1877 and established the first Japanese academic library in 1886 (Cullen & Nagata, 2008; Kaur, 2017). There were 758 Japanese universities in 2007 (Japan Library Association, 2014a), and each must have a library according to law (Cullen &

Nagata, 2008). There are three types of Japanese universities with various funding sources. There were 86 national universities (Japan Library Association, 2014a), which are the more prestigious universities (Hosono, 2006), 77 public universities (Japan Library Association, 2014a) mainly funded by local governments or prefectures (Sellers & Wakashige, 2012), and 595 private universities (Japan Library Association, 2014a) that receive some public funding (Cullen & Nagata, 2008).

All universities have main libraries and support a decentralized approach with branch and departmental libraries (Sellers & Wakashige, 2012). Kaur (2017) reported that there are 1,257 university libraries and 324 college libraries in the country. Library directors are not professional librarians but professors whose reputation elevates the status of the university and the library as well as ensures continued funding (Cullen & Nagata, 2008). About half of the library staff hold a certification, with nonprofessionals holding the remaining positions.

These libraries have various services, including book collections with about one-third in English language (Cullen & Nagata, 2008). At least 90 percent of the libraries have an online public access catalog (OPAC) searchable via the Internet (Hosono, 2006; Kaur, 2017) and offer a wide range of electronic materials, including ejournals and ebooks often obtained through consortia (Cullen & Nagata, 2008). Reference services are provided at most libraries through the circulation department since there are no reference departments. Interlibrary loans are provided through a national system, and digitization projects of special and rare collections are ongoing (Hosono, 2006). They share bibliographic records through the National Institute of Informatics, with some cataloging outsourced to contract workers or vendors.

### *Challenges*

A major challenge of academic libraries is the professionalism of the staff. University leaders believe that library directors not trained in library management are important and necessary for academic libraries, but such a philosophy leads to a deficit of strategic vision for academic libraries in an ever-evolving library sector. Half of all staff are not certified, have little training in librarianship, and are

moved around library departments to fill departmental needs (Cullen & Nagata, 2008). Reference departments are often not present, and if they are, the librarians staffing the departments do not specialize in reference services. The understaffing in the libraries leads to the use of volunteers to help users access information and the outsourcing of essential library tasks such as cataloging (Hosono, 2006). The volunteers generally do not have the skills to understand the complexities of information discovery and academic research services, requiring professional librarians who could build and strengthen library services. If the mission of these libraries is curriculum support and scholarship, then there is doubt that they are succeeding in readying their students and faculty to compete in global scholarship.

Academic libraries face other challenges in a variety of areas that are also present in some U.S. libraries. Academic library budgets have steadily decreased even as journal subscriptions have increased (Hosono, 2006). This leaves collection development librarians to make difficult decisions concerning acquisitions and directors with reduced funding to hire professional librarians. Another consequence of the budget decreases is the shelving crisis. Some libraries are near capacity, with others exceeding their capacities and storing materials in boxes (Hosono, 2006). With tight budgets, the libraries rarely have money to build new facilities or purchase compact shelving. Weeding the collection has not been considered, and more electronic resources may help, but they are costly in an era of fewer financial resources. In addition, users must receive physical copies of electronic sources because Japan's copyright laws do not allow electronic transmission of the material (Cullen & Nagata, 2008; Sellers & Wakashige, 2012).

Academic library directors must address the budget issues in order to maintain the integrity of the libraries through discussions with the administration and reallocate money from other areas of the library to secure additional shelf space.

### **Community Libraries**

#### *Overview*

The popular community libraries emerged in 1955 (Hashimoto, 2012), and although it is difficult to

determine the exact number because they are not registered with any government agency, Kanna (2003) estimated their numbers at approximately 4000. They are grassroots volunteer libraries for children created and managed usually by mothers of the attending children. There are two types: one located in the homes of the citizens and another in local community centers (Kanna, 2003) with dimensions rarely exceeding six by four meters in size for home libraries and seven by eleven meters for community center libraries (Cheunwattana, 2008). These community libraries arose from a need to have specific literacy programs for children from 0 years of age to primary school age not provided by public libraries (Hashimoto, 2012). Also, some public libraries were not centrally located for the families or easy to use, and they wanted these services accessible to their children (Cheunwattana, 2008).

They are mostly privately funded and created by one parent who donates the space and some materials for all to share with additional materials donated by the participants (Cheunwattana, 2008). Recently, public libraries have lent some materials to these libraries to support literacy (Kanna, 2003). They contain books of various age levels, and unlike a public library's management and organization, these home-based libraries are managed as the owner deems necessary (Cheunwattana, 2008). Book loans and after-school reading programs are the two main services provided, although other services such as puppet shows are sometimes provided. Services designed for children with print disabilities and other disabilities are offered at some locations.

The children served develop a joy of reading and socialization skills, while parents have the opportunity to meet other parents to discuss family matters and have a hands-on approach to their children's education (Cheunwattana, 2008). This allows parents some control over their children's education and a role in their success later in life. There may be up to 15 attendees at any one time, and some families moved into a specific neighborhood because of the community library. The hours of operation vary, with some open twice a month and others open two hours per week (Hashimoto, 2012). What makes them successful is the "homey, warm, loving, and

relaxing atmosphere" (Cheunwattana, 2008, p. 21) that participants do not experience in large, high-ceiling public libraries.

### *Challenges*

The literature revealed no major challenges with community libraries but did indicate how these libraries reflected the ineffectiveness of public libraries in two areas: services and library design. The lack of special services for infants, toddlers, and primary school-aged children in public libraries has enabled the community libraries to thrive. The Japan Library Association has recognized the need to improve children's services in public libraries and issued a report in 1976 declaring free lending of books, improving children's services, and creating a network of resources so more citizens have access to those resources (Kanna, 2003). Public libraries have been improving their services with training for children's librarians and cooperation between schools and libraries, for example, but the popularity of the community libraries overshadows any gains in the public sector. Public libraries also suffer from a lack of qualified children's librarians. The Society for Children's Libraries and the Japan Library Association have attempted to bolster specialized training to create a professional environment. However, significant changes still need to be implemented to improve the quality of librarianship and public library services to children to compete with the instruction in community libraries. Community libraries support a welcoming atmosphere with their small spaces and intimate settings. These factors would be difficult to replicate in public libraries with institutional furniture and unfamiliar faces. Public libraries need to not only improve services but also redesign spaces for children.

### ***National Libraries***

#### *Overview*

The main national library in Japan is the National Diet Library, or parliament library, akin to the Library of Congress in the United States. It was established in 1948, and just like the Library of Congress, "acquires all kinds of materials published in Japan to preserve them for the national cultural heritage" (Takayama et al., 2017, p. 2562). It consists of the Tokyo Main Library, the Kansai-kan (the national library's second facility located in the Kansai region), the International

Library of Children's Literature (located in Tokyo's Old Imperial Library), the Toyo Bunko (Oriental Library) as well as 26 branches serving various national agencies (Takayama et al., 2017). The national library employs over 900 people to care for the 8.6 million books and 11 million serials as well as digital resources. It offers all the usual library services such as reference services, a public reading room, interlibrary loan, and Internet services. The library collects books from other countries and archives governmental websites (Sellers & Wakashige, 2012).

The key projects of the national library illustrate its commitment to the country, its people, and its staff. The National Diet Library has a focused collection development plan of acquiring materials on the post-war occupation, maps, and foreign books about Japan (Sellers & Wakashige, 2012). The library has been implementing a strategic plan to preserve the intellectual endeavors of its people and a push to improve services. For about two decades, it has developed training programs to improve the skills of its staff. Training programs in conservation and preservation, interlibrary loans, and early books have been offered in-person and online.

### *Challenges*

No significant challenges were revealed in the literature for the National Diet Library. However, the library encounters some of the challenges other libraries experience. Its budget has been reduced (Sellers & Wakashige, 2012) and may continue to experience financial difficulties dictated by economic conditions. Mutual visit programs with China and Korea improve relations between countries, but the program does not reach beyond its immediate area (National Diet Library, Japan, 2012a). The program insulates libraries in Japan from non-Asian influences and may reinforce current library strategies and negate change. Expanding this program with libraries in other parts of the world would expose new perspectives and services from those countries to the library leadership and spur new developments.

### **Public Libraries**

#### *Overview*

Public libraries came into the modern era with the passage of the Library Law in 1950 (Yang, 2017). The law "made local government responsible for

operating public libraries, with services and access provided freely to the public" (Sellers & Wakashige, 2012, p. 205). Public libraries are located in the cities and exist in about 50 percent of towns and villages (Takayama et al., 2017). If a town does not have a library, local community centers often have a library room within them (Nagata, 2007). As of 2018, there were 3,360 public libraries, with each citizen borrowing 5.5 books per year, only slightly below 6.1 books per year in the United States (IFLA, n.d.). Strong economic growth in the 1960s and 1970s saw an increase in public libraries and funding (Yang, 2017), but funding has been decreasing since 1999 (Sellers & Wakashige, 2012). Many public library users are satisfied with their public library but would not pay an extra fee to use it to supplement the money received from local governments (Ikeuchi et al., 2013).

Japanese public libraries provide a range of services to the public. On average, a public library contains 110,000 books (Takayama et al., 2017) and provides space for high school students to study for college entrance exams. Most maintain an OPAC, and some provide web-based services, including reservation and email-based reference services (Yang, 2017). In addition, these libraries are committed to preserving local literature and historical documents, with many libraries digitizing them for easy access. The libraries are integrating mobile phone services mostly through access to OPACs (Nagata, 2007; Negishi, 2003). The world's first palm vein authentication system to replace a library card was in a Japanese public library (Japanese public library, 2006). They provide a safe space for citizens, as witnessed by the increase in the use of nearby public libraries after the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 in the affected areas because residents needed a place to gather to establish some sense of normalcy (Nakai et al., 2016). Many public libraries offer Braille paths and music signs in the library to guide individuals with blindness, as well as a reading service and mail loan service (Yang 2017).

Donkai and Mizoue (2014) revealed that the Appropriate Standards for the Establishment and Management of Public Libraries Standards of 2001 recommended libraries incorporate audio-visual materials and books on tape for those with other

sensory disabilities as well as offer sign language communication and read-aloud services.

Some public libraries collaborate with bookstores and eateries to create book centers where the library, bookstore, and eateries are managed by a corporate entity instead of the government and hire nonprofessional outsourced staff to manage them (Coffman, 2017). Visits to these book centers have increased dramatically, and circulation has increased more than threefold. There have been recent initiatives to develop innovative programs for teenagers (Uragami et al., 2019) and events for adults (Ikeshita, 2020). Reference services have experienced a decline in reference questions, and public libraries without reference services have increased (Watanabe, 2011), contributing to the view by administrators that reference is not essential or should be restructured. The outsourcing of library staff has led to a "weakening and decay of libraries" (Tsuji et al., 2006, p. 253) as nonprofessional staff and a host of volunteers manage them (Sellers & Wakashige, 2012).

### *Challenges*

Although Japanese libraries are improving their services, public libraries still face challenges in the new millennium. Foremost is the inadequate training that librarians receive. The programs approved by the government do not provide the skills to be a professional in the field (Tsuji et al., 2006). The libraries are viewed as a place to study and gather information and materials, not a hub of programs, exhibits, web-based information, and computer use (Klopner & Nagata, 2011), giving them a one-dimensional aspect. The development of book centers has reduced libraries to retail stores and has perpetuated the view that librarianship is not a profession because library credentials are not needed to secure a position in the book centers. As with academic libraries, employing nonprofessional staff prevents public libraries from forging forward with innovations because the staff does not possess the knowledge or vision to innovate.

Other challenges do not make the libraries inviting to some citizens. A demographic eluding public libraries is the elderly population over 65 years of age, comprising 25 percent of the population (Donkai &

Mizoue, 2014). The libraries do not focus on programming and services for this population and have not changed their perspective of the elderly as sedentary and frail. Some public libraries include services and materials for individuals with blindness, low vision, and print disabilities, as well as the digital accessible information system (DAISY), the global standard for talking digital books (Nomura, 2004). But, according to Ikeshita (2020), librarians do not know how to use this resource and therefore cannot assist users. Lastly, the success of a library is still measured by its circulation numbers (Klopfer & Nagata, 2011) and the number and quality of the materials (Ikeuchi et al., 2013). The circulation model focuses success on objects, not people, shifting the mission away from community engagement to statistics. Also, this applies to reference services where face-to-face connections between staff and users disappear and reference questions become answers instead of conversations. Spending so much time on circulation statistics leaves little time to concentrate on reference services and programming.

### ***School Libraries***

#### *Overview*

The term "school library" was first established in Japan with the revision of the National Curriculum Standards in 1951 (Kim, 2011). According to IFLA (n.d.), there were nearly 38,000 school libraries in 2015, ten times more than public libraries in the country. Under the School Library Law of 1953, schools must have libraries and have recently experienced a movement to improve their collections, facilities, and information literacy. While libraries are mandatory, professional librarians are not, although teacher-librarians must be certified to teach (Kumbar, 2017). The law mandates a teacher-librarian taken from the school's teaching staff manage the library (Takayama et al., 2017). Day-to-day tasks are relegated to clerical staff who perform collection maintenance and circulation functions.

The integration of school libraries into schools has been a series of developments throughout the decades. In the 1950s, it was considered an add-on to education, and at best, a reading center (Takayama et al., 2017); often, visiting a school library was considered an extracurricular activity (Kim, 2011). The language in the National Curriculum Standards

changed the emphasis from a possible place to visit to an important place to learn. The 1970s and 1980s saw an emphasis on improving reading abilities with the school library part of that process. The 1990s hailed school libraries as essential to the learning process, and teachers were requested to use school libraries as part of their curriculum. A revision of the standards in 2008 greatly increased the power of the school library in instruction, reading, learning, and information literacy.

School libraries provide basic services. Their collections are modest, with about 7,000 volumes in primary schools, 9,000 in lower secondary schools, and 21,000 in upper secondary schools (Takayama et al., 2017). Each school has computers and Internet connectivity, and many schools have OPACs. Some school libraries collaborate with area public libraries to share resources in an effort to reduce costs. The teacher-librarians offer typical library orientations in 90 percent of school libraries that a majority of students remember years later (Enomoto, 2016).

### *Challenges*

One main challenge for school libraries is the lack of professional library staff. In theory, a teacher-librarian appears to be a suitable personnel choice for school libraries because teachers know what materials would complement their curricula. Many teacher-librarians value the libraries for research assignments and literacy but do not have time to manage the library and their course loads simultaneously (Nakamura, 2008). School administrators often do not recognize the importance of school librarians, and even the students using the libraries recognized professional school librarians as a part of a school library only 38 percent of the time in one study (Okada, 2014). If school administrators continue to hire teacher-librarians at a ratio of 3:2 (Nakamura, 2008) and possibly as high as 98 percent (Kumbar, 2017) over professional school librarians, the libraries could continue to suffer from a lack of quality materials and accessibility (Kim, 2011).

Another challenge is that the materials in school libraries do not always follow the school curriculum (Kim, 2011), although the School Library Law dictates it. The location of the school library is also an issue at some schools because it is often out of sight instead

of prominently placed for discovery. Students in high school do not use the school library to research topics or interact with reference services but to study for exams, borrow books, and read books (Enomoto, 2016). Their usage is similar to their use of public libraries (Yang, 2017), indicating a consistent view of a library's purpose.

School libraries are not focused on learning as much as meeting legal requirements and providing tables and chairs for homework and study. Although these are important matters, school administrators can meet both the requirements and information needs of the students by establishing a library team of a full-time professional school librarian and a consulting teacher-librarian who would not be responsible for operations but assist with collection development. The school librarian would be the face of the school library and have the time to revolutionize the library and eliminate some of the challenges.

### ***Special Libraries***

Special libraries provide specific resources and services to a designated group of users (Sellers & Wakashige, 2012). These libraries cover a range of subjects, including arts, economics, languages (Asundi & Karisiddappa, 2017), science and technology, medicine, business, and Japanese studies, and are found in government agencies, private companies, and research institutes (Takayama et al., 2017). They are controlled by private organizations, government agencies, and research institutes; about one-quarter of the special libraries are small and managed by one person. A variety of users access materials in special libraries, including "engineers, doctors, executives, R and D personnel, archivists, [and] entrepreneurs" (Asundi & Karisiddappa, 2017, p. 234). To provide a representative sample of the state of special libraries, the history and challenges of music and prison libraries are discussed below.

### ***Music Libraries***

#### *Overview*

There are 25 music libraries in Japan, with 24 privately owned and one public music library named the Tokyo Metropolitan Festival Hall (Matsushita, 1989). They collect and preserve a range of musical styles from Japanese folk music to European classical

music, with privately-owned music libraries usually concentrating on specific areas of music (Itoh et al., 2010). The Music Library Association of Japan formed a Special and Public Libraries Committee to make music information available to as many people as possible. Because these libraries are autonomous and have a limited audience, special music libraries have specialized music staff and easily collaborate with related institutions.

One such library is the Japan Choral Music Centre and Library, founded in 1979 and concentrating mainly on 20th-century choral music from around the world. Another example is the Min-on Music Library. It began in 1974 with an emphasis on Western music, and its collection includes rare books and old sound recordings not available anywhere else. Although not special libraries, public libraries have music collections for the general public and are worth mentioning. They make Japanese and Western popular music available free of charge to the public (Itoh et al., 2010). These collections are not as comprehensive as the special libraries because only high-circulation music is available.

### *Challenges*

The only significant challenge for these libraries is the trend to outsource most library positions to reduce costs and hire more subject specialists than generalists (Hasegawa, 2007), leading to a management team not invested in the library. For public library music collections, printed music collections are not easy to find because they are not shelved together as a special collection. There are limited public music libraries with librarians who understand the subject as most employ part-time, outsourced employees (Hasegawa, 2007; Itoh et al., 2010). This strategy does not support strategic planning or music collection development because the staff does not understand the subject and cannot make important decisions regarding the inclusion of materials on music.

### ***Prison Libraries***

#### *Overview*

The incarceration rate in Japan is lower than in many Western countries (Lehmann, 2000), but the need for libraries in prisons is still essential. The importance of prison libraries for the prison environment and re-

entry into civilian life has been recognized by IFLA in their guidelines for prison libraries (Lehmann & Locke, 2005). Japan reformed its Prison Law in 2005 and 2006 and included a statement on an inmate's right to read and obtain reading materials and mandated prisons to make reading materials available. This type of special library is used by those who cannot physically access other types of libraries because of confinement (Lehmann, 2000; Nomura, 2004). In 2011, there were 188 facilities in the country operated by national, regional, and local authorities, with few having a functioning prison library (Nakane, 2011). The materials typically available include "[c]omic books, dictionaries, legal publications, current fiction, and materials related to vocational certification" (Nakane, 2011, p. 451).

### *Challenges*

The challenges for prison libraries are numerous. The Prison Law did not give prisoners the right to have a prison library, just the right to read. Professional librarians are not employed in prisons, and "no functional library space" (Nakane, 2011, p. 447) exists in most facilities. Provided materials are sometimes placed in different spaces in the facilities, with inmates partially responsible for managing the materials (Nakane, 2011). Materials necessary to the inmates' intellectual, emotional, and recreational growth should be available within the limits of a facility's policies. To improve them, the government needs to mandate prison libraries and hire professional librarians to manage them. Such improvements will strengthen the prison library system and improve the lives of inmates and their chances of a successful re-entry into civilian life after prison.

### **Discussion**

Many challenges have been discussed concerning Japanese libraries that generally fall into three categories: professionalism, LIS education, and community engagement. All three categories are intertwined as LIS education affects the professionalism of librarians, for example. The professionalism of librarians, both in perception and leadership abilities, needs to be strengthened to meet the evolving needs of users and professionals. Library and information science education has not been significantly updated since the passage of the



Library Law in 1950 and is "rudimentary and consists of short courses" (Vårheim et al., 2012, p. 252 ) and rarely results in a full-time position (Tsuji et al., 2006). User-focused libraries depend on LIS education that produces professionals with the skills to engage the community and satisfy their information needs. These three challenges are crucial to the success of libraries, librarians, and their communities in Japan.

### ***Professionalism***

The leading library association in the country is the Japan Library Association, a non-profit organization (Miura, 2019), with several auxiliary specialized professional associations such as the Japan Medical Library Association (Sellers & Wakashige, 2012). The Japan Library Association was founded in 1892 and was the third established national library association after the United States and Great Britain. The association provides support and activities typically associated with professional organizations, including conferences, publications, and ethical guidelines (Japan Library Association, 2014b). It has provided basic services to its membership without addressing evolving new challenges in the profession. It has addressed LIS education by instituting a Certified Professional Librarian Program for librarians who have completed additional training, professional research, and related activities (Kishida, 2011; Miura, 2019), but has been slow to strengthen the basic educational requirements for national librarian certification. Its program may be viewed as a diversion from fixing a more systemic problem that library leaders are not able to address successfully.

The literature indicated that a service model different from the circulation model is necessary for libraries in the new millennium (Nagata, 2007), but leadership has not realized the importance of diversifying services and engaging with the community. The library profession could learn new approaches and services from similar institutions, but it remains insular and reinforces old routines. Cooperation between similar institutions with similar goals has not been a priority for the association, so libraries, archives, and museums continue to work independently (Takayama et al., 2017). However, the profession only has to look within its borders to discover how community libraries have succeeded in connecting with communities and delivering needed

services. With minimal effort, leaders could learn from neighboring countries such as China who has implemented greater connections between libraries and users through services and improved access to expand and modernize their libraries (Yang, 2017). These recommendations require library leaders to step out of their comfort zones and embrace global trends and best practices.

In addition, the state of librarian professionalism is low in Japan, and Japanese librarians suffer from an identity crisis. While there are thousands of certified librarians available for employment, only 50 percent of employed academic librarians are certified (Cullen & Nagata, 2008), for instance. Librarians are not recognized as professionals by the public (Kishida, 2011; Matsuoka-Motley, 2011; Vårheim et al., 2012), and students do not see the importance of school librarians in school libraries (Kumbar, 2017). In academic libraries, the director is not a professional librarian (Cullen & Nagata, 2008), and teachers serve as librarians in schools. The outsourced employees placed in libraries are usually better trained than the regular employees and considered more professional in academic libraries (Matsuoka-Motley, 2011). Many librarians have a specialization in the United States, but in Japan, librarians are expected to know all the functions of a library and not specialize in one area leading to "little opportunity for people to develop a high level of expertise in some critical areas for the advancement of libraries in the twenty-first century" (Cullen & Nagata, 2008, p. 167).

It is probably difficult for librarians to consider themselves professional when the public and the profession do not consider them worthy of that status. Building a higher status for the profession and staff requires action from many sources. The Japan Library Association is a logical place to start. The association might create a strategic plan to publicize the profession and address the low level of skills of many staff. To address the latter concern, one researcher proposed passing a law to force public libraries to employ only professional librarians instead of clerical workers to raise awareness of the profession (Hosono, 2006). Also, librarians need to advocate for themselves and help their profession's reputation, although it may be difficult in a society that defers to authority and is not given to

complementing themselves. These actions may bring respect to the profession and the staff who keep the nation's libraries running.

### ***LIS Education***

Librarian education plays a pivotal role in any library because adequately trained librarians create libraries attuned to their users' needs and possess the skills to resolve issues. It is difficult for librarians to succeed when their education consists of a two-month program that "not only creates an over-population of qualified library workers but also limits the prospective librarian's opportunity to gain sufficient knowledge of the field to become a competent practitioner" (Matsuoka-Motley, 2011, p. 275). In addition, the certification program does not prepare librarians to be children's librarians with a focus on literacy (Kanna, 2003), and about 26 percent of the certification instructors have no library experience but are teaching future librarians (Tsuji et al., 2006). It is not surprising that librarians are unprepared for the challenges facing all library sectors and are viewed as interchangeable with non-trained, outsourced staff.

It was apparent to government officials that the librarian certification program needed examination, and the instructors of the certification programs agreed and suggested: "different library grades, national testing, or the introduction of a licensing scheme" (Tsuji et al., 2006, p. 252). From 2003-2005, the Library and Information Professions and Education Renewal (LIPER) committee led by the Japan Society of Library and Information Science with a follow-up study in 2006, studied the certification process (Cullen & Nagata, 2008). The second study found that the current certification "is no longer adequate and that the 10,000 people awarded the qualification each year is too high a number" (Cullen & Nagata, 2008, p. 164). A LIS test to determine if current and future librarians meet minimum qualifications and textbook standardization have been implemented (Kishida, 2011), but they do not address the content issues of the program. This is not to say that the program must mirror programs in the West, but it must teach the skills needed to elevate the knowledge and status of librarians. Also, the certification only applies to public librarians and not academic, national, school, or special librarians

(Cullen & Nagata, 2008). It should include librarians from all library sectors in order to be comprehensive.

Another issue with the certification is the number awarded each year. On average, 10,000 students receive it each year, and there are not enough positions for all the graduates (Kishida, 2011), with only about 5 percent obtaining positions (Sellers & Wakashige, 2012). The economic downturn that began in 1997 spurred privatization of libraries through outsourcing of staff to reduce costs and provide a flexible workforce (Vårheim et al., 2012), leading to a difficult employment situation mostly in academic libraries, but also present in public libraries in many departments (Sato & Itsumura, 2008). This has led to more part-time and temporary workers as well as lower salaries. When public libraries collaborated with bookstores and eateries, all the staff were outsourced to the operation's private management company (Coffman, 2017). Not only are the careers of librarians at stake, but the privacy of users' information is also at stake since the private management companies are not obligated to protect users' privacy and routinely gather their data (Inoue, 2018).

It is striking that a profession founded on information and knowledge for its users cannot appreciate the benefits of both for itself. Very few LIPER recommendations have been implemented, and therefore LIS education remains virtually the same, although education is the tool to improve many aspects of the profession: professionalism, strategic planning, leadership, and services. Since the profession in Japan has difficulty moving forward, perhaps professionals from other countries can reach out to the Japan Library Association and offer strategic planning and review best practices while respecting their cultural norms.

### ***Community Engagement***

Programs and services are at the core of libraries and bring a wide range of communities together to share information and build community. Each library sector implements programs and services in different ways. For instance, academic libraries create consortia among other institutions to procure reduced costs for electronic materials, provide instructional learning programs for students and faculty, and cooperative

cataloging (Cullen & Nagata, 2008).

Community libraries are a great example of bringing the community together toward the common goal of literacy for children. Libraries thrive when communities thrive and believe libraries are an integral part of their communities.

Although libraries have made some progress toward building libraries for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they still fall short of the programs and services that will make their users competitive on a global scale. Japanese libraries have a history of being viewed as a place to only pick up a book before the 1960s (Nagata, 2007) and a place for high school students to study their academics (Yang, 2017). Librarians spend "too much time and energy to the administration and organization of materials and too little time and energy on users and the use of materials" (Vårheim et al., 2012, p. 250). Person-focused services such as reference services are not considered important (Nagata, 2007), so few relationships can be developed between librarians and users. The disconnection with users extends to the libraries that find it difficult to build partnerships among institutions when temporary and part-time workers cannot participate due to their limited schedules (Itoh et al., 2010; Matsuoka-Motley, 2011). Plus, few employees have the skills to create new programs and services.

Libraries can engage the community better by implementing a few new programs and services and expanding them over time. Nagata (2007) suggested libraries could improve their connections to the community by helping users with information on health and childrearing, converting the library to a community space, and integrating more technology. Libraries, particularly public libraries, can learn from the success stories of community libraries and incorporate changes to their services through personal services and activities focused on the issues of their users. Public libraries have grown the selection of children's programs, but more needs to be done to create a community and compete with the community libraries (Kanna, 2003).

Increasing programs for the elderly, including memory groups and offering materials in large-print formats (Donkai & Mizoue, 2014), can make the

elderly believe they belong in the library. These few examples illustrate how a little effort can produce positive results in the community and transform libraries into community centers.

## **Conclusion**

Libraries in Japan have served their users for nearly a century, and "growth and development of library programs and resources in the past 10 to 15 years is evident, despite Japan's continuing economic recession" (Sellers & Wakashige, 2012, p. 222). Despite successes, major challenges face most library sectors. School libraries are mostly led by teachers, public libraries are not considered a community space, academic libraries rarely have professionals managing them, and some special libraries have inadequate materials and facilities. In order to build libraries for the 21st century, Japanese librarians must gain the skills to create innovative, community-focused libraries as well as concentrate on daily tasks. As Miwa (2006) noted, "the current education and training system does not meet the contemporary human resource needs of the public library system" (p. 168). Japanese library leaders have been slow to adapt to these dynamics and have maintained traditional approaches that often do not advance services and programs for users or create a professional workforce.

Librarians must envision a modern, state-of-the-art library that brings communities together to discover themselves and the world. One approach to achieve this goal is to redefine librarians in Japan by strengthening professionalism and education to compete in the global economy. Leaders should employ only certified individuals, and the Japan Library Association should lobby for changes in the certification process to elevate the status of librarians. Another approach is to perform a needs assessment to determine the services and programs desirable to users and non-users in every library sector. Such results will propel libraries to implement critical changes and build community on a large scale in a rapidly changing information landscape. Lastly, after the war, library leadership styled their libraries after Western libraries and could reignite that spirit again with their Western partners. The challenges raised in this article were intended as a catalyst for change for libraries and librarianship in Japan and a

call to librarians in other countries to offer support to Japan as they proceed to reinvigorate their libraries, users, and country.

This paper presented an overview of the current state of libraries in Japan, but by no means is it the end of the research. Although the included research is recent or nearly recent, more research is needed to reveal any current initiatives. There may be more information regarding the subject in the Japanese language, but this information could not be included due to the language barrier of the author. More research on specific populations such as the elderly would highlight their needs and provide a blueprint for improvements.

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